

EARNING A TITLE WITH SOME WEIGHT BEHIND IT OR HOW TO GET INVOLVED IN A WORKING PACK DOG EVENT

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog Club of America recognizes the Novice Pack Dog and Pack Dog Titles for their breed. Bernese are also welcome to participate in events where there are available spots. The following articles have been reprinted to introduce you to this sport.

Working Pack Dog Hike

by MJ & John Berendes

(Reprinted with permission from the BMDCR's "Mountain Dog Messenger")

While reading the July newsletter, we saw the notice for people that enjoy backpacking with their dogs. That's us, we thought. What could this be about? Reading on, we learned about the Working Pack Dog titles offered by many Working Group breed clubs. To earn a Novice Pack Dog title, a dog must complete four 10-mile hikes packing a load equal to 20% of its body weight. To earn the Pack Dog title, the dog must carry 30% of its body weight on four 10-mile hikes. The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog Club of America (GSMDCA) recently approved these titles for their breed.

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog Club of the Rockies (GSMDCR) was going to hold their first Work Pack Dog Title event in September, and they extended an invitation to BMDCR members. Since we frequently hike and backpack with our dogs, we decided to accept their invitation and participate in this program. Gretel and Brody were about to begin a most excellent adventure!!

The first hike was scheduled for Sept. 28 in Boulder, so we contacted Event Coordinators, Tom & Carol Scribner for some training tips. For the first month of training, we gradually added distance and weight. We carefully observed the dogs for any problems. The second month we just put in mileage with the packs on. The training proved to be a really special time with the dogs, and lots of fun. Gretel & Brody would jump for joy whenever we got their packs out! We averaged 20 miles a week in the woods and up in the tundra. We hiked dozens of trails and climbed several peaks.

The day for the competition finally arrived and we felt ready. The "Hippie Swissies" are here, GSMDCR members said as we arrived for weigh-in at 6:45 a.m. The Berners proved to be the lightest dogs there (except for the vivacious Hunter.) We were beginning to learn about the massive bodies of the GSMD - a.k.a the "crew cut Berners." These dogs really impressed us with their size and stamina.

After dogs and packs were weighed and adjusted, we headed for the trails. The Mesa and Doudy trails were combined to get the required 10 mile distance. These trails meander through woods, mesas and meadows with breathtaking views of the Flatirons and foothills. There were 2 creeks along the way and a lake at the end. Dogs and handlers kept a good pace, and began to consume food and water from the dog's packs. We were all eager to lighten their loads! The early start time kept the dogs and their humans cool for most of the hike. Nine dogs and handlers participated and all completed the hike that day. The first leg of the Working Pack Dog title was behind us!

Tom and Carol Scribner coordinated the event and did a super job. Everything ran smoothly and their hospitality was very warm. The other GSMDCR members made us feel welcome. We'd like to join them on additional legs of the Working Pack Dog Title program. Gretel and Brody are anxious to hike some more!!

Rocky Mountain Pack Dogs

by Tom Scribner

(Reprinted with permission from "The Greater Swiss Mountain Mail", Fall 1998)

As Swissy owners, we all have our own conceptions as to what kind of work we think our particular dog(s) might be good at. It's kind of like a parent trying to find a sport for their kids to participate in. You want something fun that will help round out their personalities, and still provide the exercise their physical bodies require. The activity that I have in mind is simplicity itself. All you need is a dog pack, some good walking shoes, maybe a leash, and before I forget, something to put in the pack. A couple of bricks will do in a pinch if you can't think of anything more practical. Just step outside and go.

The dog pack adds a whole new dimension to this most routine of activities. Instead of just going for a walk, your dog is now working. Depending on the distance and weight carried, a back pack excursion can be a very serious workout. So if your Swissy is temporarily out of a job, and is casting about for some work to do, why not do both of you a favor and give dog packing a try!

A small group of us recently did just that. Over the past summer each participant made the commitment to train along with their dog for the first official GSMDCA pack dog title event. In a nutshell, the title requires that each dog carry 20% (novice) or 30% (pack dog) of their body weight over a measured 10 mile trail or cross country course. The weight requirement is eased by the amount of food and water consumed by both the dog and the handler during the event. Over the time it takes to cover ten miles the weight reduction is substantial, on a hot day you can figure up to 50%.

Completion of four (4) such "legs" is required before the title is awarded. Two of the ten mile legs may be substituted with a single 5 mile out, 5 mile back, overnight camping trip. This reduces the total number of legs required from 4 to 3, but ups the ante in the adventure and commitment department. You and your canine will need to carry everything you need to be self sufficient for a night in the outback on your back(s). For those of you that have never tried or perhaps even contemplated an overnight backpacking trip with your dog, I promise it will be one of the most rewarding and bonding experiences that the two of you will ever have together. We once had a Chesapeake who loved her backpack trips so much that when we got the packs out she would not let them out of her sight. Piankitank (Tank) even refused her bed, preferring to sleep on the floor next to the packs. There was no way -no how she was going to get left behind, and she never was.

Now back to the subject at hand. This year's inaugural event was the 10 mile day hike variety. On the gorgeous morning of Monday, September 28th our dog pack of pack dogs could be seen snaking its way along the Mesa and Doudy Draw trails. This trail system meanders up and down the foothills of the front range along the western outskirts of Boulder, Colorado. This is a wonderful trail containing a garden variety of habitat and terrain including ponderosa forests, huge golden meadows (without cows) and lush riparian canyon bottoms. In stunning contrast are the sheer rocky outcroppings of the Flatirons towering above for much of the way. Finally, to top it all off, there is even a lake at the end of Doudy Draw for the dogs to celebrate and cool off in.

The event day began with the weigh in -courtesy of Boulder's All Pets Clinic. This we pulled off without so much as a growl and after a short drive found ourselves gathered at the start in Chautauqua Park. We were a small group, just 7 Swissies and 2 Berners, but that is probably more dogs wearing packs than any of us had seen before. As we began, I swear an aura of positive energy engulfed our unique entourage. The dogs were enthused and alert despite having been up since well before daybreak. The humans were focused but relaxed, confident in the knowledge that they had prepared for this day.

The drone of Monday morning rush-hour noise slowly faded and then gave way completely to the sounds of nature and of course, our dog train. Hunter took the point as naturally as a greyhound chasing a rabbit. Baloo could usually be found right behind, nudging Hunter for the position of top dog. Mama Mac could be counted on to provide the rear guard as her preferred pace is slow and steady, and she certainly enjoys stopping to "smell the flowers" - if you know what I mean. Rubin, Apache, Summit, Hanna, and the two Berners - Brody and Gretel - jockeyed back and forth somewhere in the middle. Ten miles, including nearly 2000 vertical feet, sounds like a long way to hike, but time passes quickly when you're having fun and everyone held up great. The dogs did get a little warmer than ideal as the pack scurried along trying to keep Hunter from leaving them in the dust. In retrospect, I definitely should have hiked slower. Hanna drank a lot of water from Eldorado Creek during our lunch stop and then threw it all up while hiking double time on the Doudy Draw trail. This was largely my fault, I got too caught up in the pack mentality and lost that intimate communication link to my dog which is one of their best lines of defense against any physical problems that may arise. She was fine afterwards, and we finished at HER pace, lesson learned.

By 2:30 in the afternoon everyone had completed the first leg toward their pack dog title. We had suffered no casualties. Nine dogs, ten people, and not a single sign of lameness; not so much as a bruised paw - well maybe a few tender feet both human and canine - but that was all! Everyone felt proud of their beautiful mountain dogs as we watched them, finally freed from the burden of their packs, stampede in and out of the lake. Everyone, dogs and handlers alike, had trained for this day and executed nearly flawlessly. Sure, we were pleased and proud of our dogs and that was OK. They did GOOD!

Training For Packing Events

Don Dickenson
Reprinted with permission from the Swissy-L

Here's the regimen that Rubin and I used to prepare for the first GSMDCA Working Pack Dog Event. It is based on a program suggested by our event coordinators, Tom and Carol Scribner, with some modifications. It might not be for everybody, but it worked well for us.

1 Rubin's pack has a separate "vest" to which the saddlebags attach. At first we would take him on hikes just

wearing the vest to get him used to having something on his back. We then added the saddlebags with two rolls of paper towels (still in the wrappers) on each side to get him used to the bulk of the pack without much weight (about 5 pounds total). This helps the dog to become accustomed to the experience of carrying something on his or her back, and dealing with the load in an appropriate way. However, they don't seem to really get the idea that they are now "wider." (Although I am convinced that Rubin has purposely tried to knock me off of steep, narrow tracks with his pack a couple of times.)

2 Water accounts for most of the weight that our dog carries. We use one-quart Gatorade bottles in the saddlebags. After the GSMDCA announced the Working Pack Dog title and we started training in earnest, we increased Rubin's payload by about 2.5 pounds per week. Using this schedule, it took 6 to 8 weeks to get up to the event weight (20% of his body weight).

3 We started substituting regular walks with "pack hikes" over varied terrain 2 or 3 times per week. These hikes were usually only a couple of miles apiece when we started. We increased the distance very gradually over the following weeks. If we took a longer hike on one day, we'd usually take a shorter one the next time out and then work our way back up. Only rarely would I take him packing two days in a row.

4 About every 2 weeks or so we'd go for a 5 or 6 mile pack hike.

5 When we first started training for the event, I would have Rubin carry whatever weight level he had reached for the entire hike (outside of rest breaks) with me providing food and water from my own pack. When we reached about 15% of his body weight and our distances had generally increased, I started having him eat and drink from his own pack to reduce the weight as we hiked. Swissies can drink a lot of water as they hike. On the GSMDCA ten-mile pack hike, Rubin and I reduced the weight of his pack from 26 pounds at the start, to just over 10 pounds at the finish.

6 About 10 days before the event, we took a 6-mile hike with the event weight. We took another shorter hike a few days later and then another short one with 1/2 of the event weight 5 days prior to the event. We then suspended all packing until the actual event. Two days before the event we reduced our usual walks by 1/2, and the day before the event he just hung around the house and took it easy.

Some additional tips:

- Always watch your dog VERY carefully for signs of fatigue or overheating. Do not hesitate to remove your dog's pack and carry it yourself if you suspect that he may be starting to overextend his or her physical limits.
- Always bring more water than you think you'll need. as well as something for your dog to drink out of.
- Take lots of rest stops.
- After stopping to remove items (such as food or water) from the pack, make sure that the pack is properly balanced before proceeding.

In my opinion, packing is an activity that requires not only physical conditioning, but mental conditioning as well. As exciting as a new trail may be at the start, many dogs seem to get bored and lose enthusiasm on extended treks. Gradually building up distances will increase your dog's physical endurance, and will also improve his or her attention span. Remember that a ten-mile hike takes a substantial amount of time to complete (it took our group 6.5 hours).

When possible, hike on "natural" surfaces such as trails and dirt roads to toughen your dog's pads. Inspect pads periodically for cuts, abrasions, and objects such as stones, burrs or thorns. Consider investing in a set of dog "booties." These can protect your dog's feet in the event that the surface you're hiking on becomes sufficiently hot or cold to damage your dog's pads. Additionally, if a pad or paw develops a cut or blister, using this canine footwear might help your dog get to an "escape point" under his own power without causing further damage. If you get some of these boots, be sure to have your dog try them on a couple of times at home to get used to them. Most dogs don't like wearing them at first.

I can say that Rubin really seemed to benefit from the training we did for the first GSMDCA pack event. When the day of the hike arrived, I definitely felt that he was in his best shape ever.

Hope this helps!

GSMDCA Training Tips for the Working Pack Dog Event

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EVENT PREREQUISITE: The dog must have completed at least one training workout consisting of 6 miles carrying the weight to be carried during the event. The training program below should be enough to get you and your doggie through the 10 mile pack event. During your training, always keep in mind the health of your dog - be alert and in tune with his/her well being.

- 1** Start training you dog with a pack that weights at about 5 pounds. It is essential that the weight is evenly distributed amongst the two saddle bags, and be sure that no sharp edges are against your dog's back or sides.
- 2** Add 5 pounds per week until you reach 20% (or 30%) of your dog's weight.
- 3** The dog should wear the pack at least 3 to 4 times a week (in addition to walks without a pack on "off" days).
- 4** The daily distance should be 1 to 3 miles. Each week, at least one of the treks with a pack should be 3 miles.
- 5** After the first month, at least one trek with the pack, every two weeks, should be the event distance or 6 to 7 miles.
- 6** It is important to vary your training workouts to include hills as well as flat terrain. As much as possible, the training workouts with a pack should be on trails or dirt roads to toughen your dog's feet.
- 7** Do NOT attempt to train or participate if you dog has an injury or disability.

GSMDCA Working Pack Dog Rules as Applicable to Berners

GUIDELINES: The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog Club of America Working Pack Dog rules shall apply to all persons and dogs while participating at any Pack Dog event sponsored by the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog Club of America. There is no time limit on how long a Greater Swiss Mountain Dog may take to earn these titles. Once a title is earned it is kept for the remaining lifetime of that GSMD. A Greater Swiss Mountain Dog may compete at non-GSMDCA sponsored events so long as their rules meet the minimum standards set by these rules.

POLICY: It is the policy of the GSMDCA to invite and encourage any Greater Swiss Mountain Dog to enter any Working Pack Dog Event sponsored and/or approved by this club. Non-Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs will be given a confirmation letter regarding their accomplishment to be returned to their own breed club.

"Above all else, do not lose the desire to walk."

Soren Kirkegaard
